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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Federal Extension Service
Washington 25, D. C.

THE EXTENSION OUTLOOK PROGRAM

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Purpose and Need

The purpose of this statement is twofold: (1) to define and explore the scope of outlook and (2) to describe the functions of the outlook specialists.

Each individual's concept of outlook work will differ according to his training, his experiences, and his interests.

Outlook work may be considered to encompass two distinct functions: (1) technical analysis of past trends and present conditions for the purpose of understanding the interplay of economic forces as they affect different segments of the economy, (2) dissemination of outlook information and the application or use of outlook information by interested groups and individuals. An outlook worker may perform either of these functions, or a combination of the two. In addition to making economic analyses, outlook extension workers have a primary interest in obtaining the broadest possible dissemination and use of outlook information. Other economic data are usually disseminated as a part of, and along with, outlook information.

Outlook information contains basic economic data necessary for decision making -- either short-run or long-run. Outlook information is used by extension workers concerned with agricultural production, marketing, (marketing work with producers, marketing firms and consumers) and family living.

Objective and Use

The objective of an outlook program is to develop and to supply economic information to those groups and individuals who have an economic interest in producing, marketing, and consuming farm products. Extension's role is that of interpreter and supplier of this type of information. Outlook economists have a role of leadership in interpreting economic and related data and in explaining in clear terms the impact that economic forces exert upon the total economy and upon segments of the economy. This information is used by interested persons in making intelligent and rational economic decisions.

Prepared by the General Economics and Rural Sociology Branch, Division of Agricultural Economics Programs.

Technological, financial, and consumer preference changes are rapidly taking place in our expanding and dynamic economy. This places producers, handlers, and consumers of farm products under increasing economic pressure to continually make production and marketing adjustments in line with these changes. With farmers*, these adjustments are in production (acreage, variety, timing, fertilizing, etc.). Handlers must make adjustments that reflect consumer preferences, and consumers each day are making purchasing decisions. A good outlook program aids all of these groups in making adjustments through better decisions. Such a program interprets and explains the national and international framework in which agribusiness (farmers, handlers, bankers, feed-seed-machinery dealers) operates. It identifies and analyzes the socio-politico-economic forces at work. A good outlook program is not complete unless it interprets these economic forces in relation to local conditions as they may affect the farm and the family.

More and more people want the kind of information furnished by a good outlook program. This is because there is an increasing awareness that the solution of many problems is economic.

Leaders of other extension programs are finding that outlook information is useful in planning their programs and are increasingly calling upon the outlook specialist to provide more and more outlook and other economic data.

Steps in Developing and Using Outlook Material

In preparing outlook material, State outlook specialists usually base their reports upon the basic "situation reports" of the Agricultural Marketing Service. These are published periodically throughout the year by the United States Department of Agriculture. One of these is the Annual Outlook edition which is highlighted for the Annual National Agricultural Outlook Conference held in Washington during late fall. These reports and others that are prepared by Agriculture, Commerce, State, Labor, and other departments contain national and State data. In addition to using the situation reports, well trained outlook specialists also use other basic data, much of which is local. An outlook specialist needs to know what has happened and what is happening within certain segments of the economy. From this understanding he will be in a better position to interpret for interested people the impact that changing economic conditions will have on particular sectors of the economy. This is the background from which outlook specialists interpret the growth and movement of the economy in terms of production, costs, prices, consumption trends, technological and institutional innovations, etc. Out of this may develop a projection or prediction, or forecast. Forecasting may or may not be highly specialized, depending upon the limits within which one wishes to commit himself.

Methods of Dissemination

Outlook is a continuous, year-round process which originates in the Agricultural Marketing Service of the United States Department of Agriculture. Many agencies within the Federal government prepare and issue periodic reports and data which are basic to outlook. The Annual National Agricultural Outlook Conference

* When reference is made to "farmers", the broad definition is always used which includes the family.

(1) acts as a benchmark or a general means for summing up outlook for the coming year and for as much longer as an authoritative statement can be made; it refocuses attention on the broader aspects of outlook, serves as a supplement; although considerable emphasis is placed upon the Outlook Conference, it is considered to be only one important cog in the outlook program; it is especially helpful to State specialists because as they meet together they reappraise their local situations in relation to the national situation; (2) provides an excellent opportunity for specialists to discuss production, cost, and demand conditions created by drought, flood, industrial development, and other conditions in other areas; (3) provides specialists an opportunity to contact Department personnel who specialize in research having an important bearing on the outlook for commodities and cost items of special interest in their State.

In addition to the periodic "situation reports" prepared by the Department, many supplemental publications and reports that have a direct bearing upon the outlook are prepared especially for the Conference. These include such items as film strips, outlook chart books, special articles and reports, etc. Other supplemental reports based upon current research results are released throughout the year.

Outlook information is presented to the public in a number of ways and forms. The outlook specialist may present outlook information directly to the public or to other extension workers who, in turn, present it to the public.

In general, outlook information is presented:

- 1) As subject matter in the outlook specialist's program.
- 2) In some other specialist's program or in cooperation with the outlook specialist.
- 3) As subject matter for agents to incorporate into their programs.

For example, the livestock and feed outlook may be used in the following ways:

- 1) In the livestock marketing specialist's program in discussing costs and seasonal prices
- 2) In the livestock production specialist's program for the purpose of affecting grade adjustments
- 3) By farm management specialists in discussing alternative profitable feeding systems
- 4) By marketing information for consumer specialists and agents in pointing out periods of seasonal plentifulness which result in good buys
- 5) By public affairs specialists in discussing farm programs and the Soil Bank
- 6) By home management specialists working with farm families either in their regular home economics programs or in Farm and Home Development

- 7) By county agents in counseling with farm people or when speaking to civic and farm organization and other groups. In addition, outlook information is printed in many forms in various degrees of detail at either the State or county level

There are also many different combinations of effective ways in which outlook information may be disseminated. These include:

- 1) The annual outlook statement -- issued by the U. S. Department of Agriculture and by the States -- is generally helpful in generating new interest in the outlook for the coming year.
- 2) Monthly outlook publications issued by the U. S. Department of Agriculture and by the States giving timely and seasonal treatment of the general economic condition and price and supply conditions of important commodities.
- 3) Weekly market newsletters.
- 4) Mass media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television.
- 5) Public meetings held by outlook and other specialists.
- 6) Dissemination by county extension staffs.
 - a) The outlook specialist may hold outlook training meetings for county staffs to analyze and interpret outlook data and to assist them in developing effective ways of using State-prepared releases and materials.
 - b) Agents' outlook meetings. These include general outlook or the outlook for a particular commodity.
 - c) Counseling with individual people.

Functions of State Outlook Specialist

State outlook specialists are key persons in any State and are called upon to play a very important role in developing the overall extension program.

The more important functions of outlook specialists are:

- 1) Analyzing economic and related data in terms of local conditions
- 2) Working with other specialists in various subject matter fields who use outlook and other economic information in developing their programs
- 3) Helping to train county staffs in effective methods of interpreting, presenting, and using outlook information and other economic data
- 4) Providing administrators with background data for use in Farm and Home Development, Program Projection, Rural Development, etc.
- 5) Making maximum use of all communication channels for widest possible dissemination

Outlook deals primarily with subject-matter that influences the economic behavior of groups and individuals (producers, handlers, and consumers) who are concerned with agricultural products and with satisfactory family living. An outlook specialist, therefore, needs to keep the educational level of his audience in mind. He needs to make certain that the audience understands the basic factors or forces that bear upon the outlook. Such forces as the international situation, industrial activity, national income, employment, money and credit, supply and demand conditions, institutional arrangements, etc. are constantly changing. These interrelationships must be understood if their effects upon the economy are to be properly interpreted.

In addition, in being involved in making economic analyses, outlook specialists are forever seeking ways to improve their techniques of dissemination. Such techniques as clarity of writing, use of local examples, effective use of charts and diagrams, color, etc. are of prime importance to them and require much time and effort. These aids help in competition for the limited reading time of busy people. Extension editors, artists, and visual aid personnel are providing valuable assistance in the preparation of outlook materials.

Outlook specialists spend much of their time in gathering and analyzing data and in preparing stories and publications. Additional time and effort are needed to effectively perform the dissemination and training phase of a broad outlook program.

Functions of Federal Extension Program Leader

In addition to the outlook work handled by others in the Federal Extension Service as a part of their regular activities, one person in the Division of Agricultural Economics Programs has national responsibility in outlook. Much of this responsibility falls into the following categories:

- 1) Assisting States in the development of outlook programs
- 2) Assisting States in the training and the orientation of new outlook personnel
- 3) Servicing State requests for subject matter, relevant research, etc.
- 4) Working with other agencies in the U. S. Department of Agriculture in organizing, planning, and developing the Annual National Agricultural Outlook Conference
- 5) Reviewing State plans of work and annual reports
- 6) Maintaining liaison with other federal departments which are sources for subject matter

An Aid for Improvement and Expansion

Many State outlook programs have been expanded in recent years in line with the growing recognition of the need for outlook information for decision-making and for use in developing other extension programs. As an aid to expanding and

improving outlook work, the 79th Congress, in the Agricultural Marketing Act (AMA), authorized " ... to collect and disseminate market information, including adequate outlook information on a market area basis ..." This legislation made possible additional federal matching money for State outlook projects.

Eleven States have developed cooperative outlook projects with the Federal Extension Service under the Agricultural Marketing Act. These special federal funds are available to States for developing AMA projects in outlook and for expanding existing outlook projects where desirable. These AMA outlook projects are designed to aid the outlook specialist in developing a broader and better outlook program where Smith-Lever funds are not sufficient.



